



LANGSTON HUGHES: A Great American Poet

A Study Guide For Teachers

Langston Hughes was a great American poet who wrote chiefly for and about black people. During his lifetime he did a tremendous amount of writing and he has left us an impressive body of work that includes seventeen volumes of verse, three collections of short stories, numerous plays, two novels, two autobiographies, anthologies, children's books, and countless essays and articles.

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, and spent his early childhood in Lawrence, Kansas, where he was raised by his grandmother. After her death he spent the remainder of his childhood and adolescence living on and off with his mother, father, and family friends in various places, including Chicago, Cleveland, and Mexico.

Although he had not yet written his first poem, Hughes was elected Class Poet of his elementary school graduating class. At Cleveland's Central High School he wrote poems for the school magazine, the *Belfry Owl*, and was Class Poet and Editor of the Year Book his senior year. His other activities during his high-school years included track and ROTC, but his major passion was reading.



"I was reading Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Enda Ferber and Dreiser, and de Maupassant. I never will forget the thrill of first understanding the French of de Maupassant. The soft snow was falling through one of his stories in the little book we used in school, and that I had worked over so long, before I really felt the snow falling there. Then all of a sudden one night the beauty and the meaning of the words in which he made the snow fall, came to me. I think it was de Maupassant who made me really want to be a writer and write stories about Negroes, so true that people in far-away lands would read them — even after I was dead." — from *The Big Sea*.

Hughes modelled his first poems on the work of the poets Carl Sandburg and Paul Lawrence Dunbar whom he greatly admired. By the time he graduated from high school he had notebooks full of poems and he gradually developed

his own style. The uniqueness of this style was his use of elements of African American music — namely, the blues — in poetry.

Hughes published his first poem, "The Negro Speak of Rivers," in 1921 in the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine.

That same year he moved to New York and enrolled in Columbia University. (He left Columbia after a year and continued his studies in 1926 at Pennsylvania's Lincoln University.) His move to New York eventually led him to Harlem, then the cultural capitol of black America.

The beginning of Hughes's literary career coincided with several major events in the on-going black struggle for true liberty and justice. These events include the post-World War I northward migration from the South and the Caribbean; the rise of the black nationalist Marcus Garvey, and the beginning of a black cultural awakening which, although international, became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Hughes once described the Harlem Renaissance as "the period when the Negro was in vogue." This remark referred to the fact that many non-blacks treated this literary and artistic movement as a mere fad. But for artists and writers like Hughes, the Harlem Renaissance was more than a fad. It was a declaration of independence, the meaning of which Hughes captured in his famous essay, "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain" (*Nation*, 1926).

While Hughes's work is mainly based on his observations of and involvement with everyday African-Americans, he also gathered ideas and material for his writing from his

"... We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves." -- from "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."

extensive travels. His travels in the US included his 1931 tour of the south where, with "poetry as a passport," he challenged Jim Crow and held readings in almost every major southern city. His world travel included tours of West Africa, Western Europe, and the Caribbean in the 1920s and early 1930s; a 1932 visit to the Soviet Union on a film project (which was never completed) and a six-month tour of Soviet Asia, Korea, China and Japan; and a 1937 tour of civil-war Spain as a journalist.

While he never abandoned poetry, in the late 1930s and 1940s Hughes expanded his literary activities to include more plays and short stories and the founding of three theater companies. In the 1950s Hughes, who had a life-long interest in African-American history, collaborated on several works including *The Book of Negro Folklore* and *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America*. In the 1960s he edited several anthologies including *An African Treasury*, *Poems from Black Africa*, and *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*.

For Langston Hughes who was born in and grew up in poverty, fame didn't bring great fortune. Although he received numerous awards and grants, he often had to take on odd jobs (from busboy to waiter to clerk) in order to follow his craft and his dreams. In the late 1920s Charlotte Mason, a patron of the arts who gave financial assistance to several black writers of the period, began to help Hughes financially; but this support came to an end when she attempted to censor his more militant work.

Hughes was, nevertheless, a rich man. He was rich in pride in his heritage; he was rich in his compassion for the oppressed around the world. He knew what happened to his dreams deferred; and with his pen he sought to help his people and all humanity hold fast to their dreams.

Langston Hughes died on May 22, 1967. The ivy-covered three-story brownstone at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem where he spent the last twenty years of his life is one of New York's Landmarks.



Before The Performance

Explain to your students that Langston Hughes was first and foremost a poet. Tell them that he grew up in the Midwest, but eventually made Harlem his home. Explain that Hughes's significance lies in his introduction of features of the blues into poetry.

After The Performance

Discuss the times in which Langston Hughes lived, including major US and world events such as the Russian Revolution, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Make US and world maps available to your students and mark the various places Langston Hughes lived and visited. Discuss the impact travel had on his work.



— Ask Your Students The Following Questions: —

1. What is poetry? (This open-ended question is intended to allow students to explore various concepts of the art form.)
2. What is the difference between reading a poem aloud and effectively reciting or performing it? (Possible answers: The latter require attention to punctuation, rhythm, voice and diction, and involves interpretation.)
3. If Langston Hughes were alive today what issues would he be writing about? (Possible answers: The legacy of the Civil Rights Movement; drug abuse; teenage suicide; AIDS; homelessness; the crisis in American education; South Africa; Central America.)
4. If Langston Hughes were alive today what kind of music might he pattern his poetry after? (Possible answers: rap music, modern jazz, modern gospel.)



Follow-up Activities

1. Provide students with a selection of Langston Hughes's poems. Have each student illustrate one poem and share his or her interpretation with classmates. Suggested poems include:

"Ballad of the Landlord"	"Harlem"	"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"
"Dream Boogie"	"Joy"	"Poet to Bigot"
"Epilogue"	"Mother to Son"	"When Sue Wears Red"

2. Have each student write a poem about some part of his or her culture, neighborhood, or family.

3. Have each student research one of Hughes's contemporaries and prepare an oral report for an up-coming session. Possible profile subjects include:

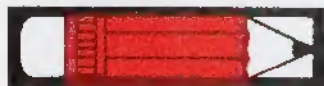
Arna Bontemps (writer)	James Weldon Johnson (writer)
Mary McLeod Bethune (educator)	Alain Locke (critic/educator)
Countee Cullen (poet)	Claude McKay (poet)
Aaron Douglass (painter)	Bessie Smith (singer)
Duke Ellington (composer)	Wallace Thurman (writer/editor)
Marcus Garvey (activist)	James Van Der Zee (photographer)
Lena Horne (singer/actress)	Ethel Waters (singer)
Zora Neal Hurston (writer/anthropologist)	

LANGSTON HUGHES EDUCATION PROJECT

LANGSTON HUGHES EDUCATION PROJECT POST TEST

Have your students write their answers to the following questions at the completion of the **Langston Hughes Education Project** to measure their knowledge of Langston Hughes.

1. What three things did Langston Hughes write about most?
2. Why did Langston Hughes write about the things he wrote about?
3. What music does Langston Hughes's poetry sound like?
4. What does a poet give to society?
5. What is special about the Harlem Renaissance?
6. What are four world events that happened during Langston Hughes's lifetime?
7. What are some of the problems Langston Hughes faced as an African-American?
8. What problems did Langston Hughes face as a writer?
9. How has your knowledge about Langston Hughes affected your feelings about poetry?
10. How has your knowledge about Langston Hughes affected your thoughts about African-American culture?





NEW WORDS



ANTHOLOGY — A collection of writings by various authors or a collection of different writings by one author.

THE BLUES — A style of music which was created by African-Americans in the late 1800s which typically has a slow tempo and is frequently about sad times and experiences.

CULTURE — The art, skills, customs, and beliefs of a given people.

DEFERRED — That which has been put off, delayed, or postponed.

ESSAY — A short composition on a specific idea or subject.

HARLEM — A section of New York City in the Northeast of Manhattan. Harlem is home

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JIM CROW —

to many black cultural institutions and famous writers, past and present. Although blacks make up a large part of Harlem's population, various other ethnic groups also live there.

A term for the former policy of segregation against black people in the United States.

LITERARY —

Of or relating to literature (poetry, plays, novels, short stories) or creative writers.

POETRY —

A form of creative writing in which thoughts and feelings are expressed with an imaginative use of words that is different from ordinary speech.

RENAISSANCE — A rebirth or revival.

NEW BOOKS



The following books may be helpful resources:

The Langston Hughes Reader (George Braziller, 1958)

Selected Poems of Langston Hughes (Alfred A. Knopf, 1959)

Langston Hughes, American Poet by Alice Walker (Thomas Y. Crowell, 1974)

The Life of Langston Hughes, volumes I & II, by Arnold Rampersad (Oxford University Press, 1986, 1988)

A Pictorial History of Black Americans (5th edition) edited by Langston Hughes, Milton Meltzer & C. Eric Lincoln (Crown Publishers, 1983)

Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America introduction by Mary Schmidt Campbell, essays by David Driskell, David Levering Lewis, and Deborah Willis Ryan (The Studio Museum in Harlem/Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987)

The Harlem Renaissance Remembered edited by Arna Bontemps (Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972)

The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary for the Era edited by Bruce Kellner (Methuen, 1987)



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